

## A Meditation on Meditation: The Horizons of *Meditative Thinking* in Tibetan Monasticism and American Anthropology

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A thinker sits alone in a room, reflecting on the deeply complex nature of the social world in perpetual motion just outside the door. After a long period of contemplation, the thinker concludes that most people cling desperately to what are in fact ‘always already’ fluid categories, borders, words, and names. The nation is an illusion; home does not exist until we leave it. The ‘other’ is a fiction, and so is everything else we create ourselves in opposition to. In fact, in the ultimate sense, if not conventional sense, even the ‘self’ is not what it appears to be. Finally, the truest of all possible truths begins to slowly crystallize. The thinker exhales deeply.

But wait—there’s a persistent knocking on the door—it is getting louder and more frenetic by the minute. The room does not belong to the thinker, instead it belongs to an institution, which expects, no, *demand*s, that these very questions be examined, but there are so many other demands as well: the door

springs open, and in marches a long line of protocols, hierarchies and disciplines, all shadowed by various instantiations of pride and power.

The thinker is then called upon to fulfill endless obligations to the institution, whose own fluid, illusory nature remains somehow masked throughout. Often the contradictory demands of the institution proceed to ruthlessly reify many of the aforementioned abstractions, and our thoughtful soul is drawn into webs of competitive intrigues, self-aggrandizing projects, and ultimately fails to recognize the illusions within which s/he remains trapped.

But why? Why doesn't our thinker use the theoretical tools she or he has applied so penetratingly on other things/places/subjectivities to examine the home "institution" itself? Who is this un-reflexive expert of reflexivity? A university scholar trapped in the top room of an ivory tower? Or, perhaps, a Tibetan Buddhist monastic ensnared in the habitus of the *vinaya* (the Buddhist monastic code of discipline)? Or both?

The Buddhist monastic (monk *or* nun) and the university academic both ostensibly seek knowledge of the realities of society and subject, but through recourse to different institutionalized epistemologies, pedagogies and methodologies. Yet there are some striking similarities. In European history, there is a complex and intertwined relationship between Christian monastics and emergent intellectuals (Brint 1994, Le Goff 1963), while for most of Tibetan history, the monasteries were the primary institutions of higher learning and scholasticism.<sup>i</sup> Bourdieu asserts that the scholar has the benefit of "an institutionalized position of studious leisure" (1990:381), but the Tibetan monastic has a similar mandate to disengage from certain social conventions in order to reflect upon them. Consider one of

the prime methods of philosophic engagement towards truth-seeking: meditation, or deep, often reflexive, analytical thinking.

At the risk of essentializing or over-simplifying two very different bodies of experts—‘Western’ university scholars<sup>ii</sup> and Tibetan Buddhist monastics<sup>iii</sup>—both of which exist in various forms in divergent regional, historical and sociocultural contexts, I argue that a side by side examination of the patterns of social norms of these two sets of meditative experts may be illuminating. Here I attempt a “provocative juxtaposition” (Boyer 2005:289) of two intellectual communities of expertise—social scientists (especially anthropologists) at American universities and Tibetan Gelukpa monastics in exile—without eliding the substantive differences between them or trying to blithely stuff either set of experts into the other’s proverbial robes.

In general, despite the sharp analytical instruments available—the tradition of Tibetan analytical meditation, and the tradition of deep analytical thinking inherent in Western social theories and methods, for example—the institutions of the monastery and the university are themselves often spared the penetrating insight that their denizens turn onto other social institutions. If these are indeed failures, then what might they teach us about these two institutional cultures in particular, and about institutions in general? What would academics and monastics stand to gain from meditating, or thinking meditatively, towards deeper knowledge of the subcultures of their own esteemed institutions? What, indeed, would they stand to lose?

Or put otherwise: how is it possible that those fortunate enough to have mastered tools of reflexivity have not put them to sufficient use? It appears that institutionalization often runs counter to the work of both fabled ‘enlightenments,’ so that

scholars and monks are forced to reconcile deep institutional ambiguities about priorities and goals, and to ignore certain disjunctures between *raison d'être* and *modus operandi*. The charismatic thinkers (such as the Buddha and JeTsongkhapa in the Gelukpa-verse) and prophets (such as the Boas, Levi-Strauss and Bourdieu of the anthropological teori-verse) of the past are haunting specters, but in their absence we flounder for institutional stability, and in the process some of the spirit may have drained out of the profound (see Weber 1968).

Denizens of institutions tend to demonstrate a real ambivalence to self-reflection upon the institution. When Gelukpa monastics do meditate or think analytically, it is not upon the monastery itself. Similarly, if anthropologists observe single-pointedly, concentrate, analyze or interpret, it is not upon the university or the discipline themselves. This is not to say that there is no self-reflection at all, but only that there is not much in the way of quantity or quality. In the academy, 'front-stage' reflections are still only ever side-shows: surface observations, such as dry statistical reporting on trends in professorial salaries since the turn of the century; the semi-marginalized side projects of junior scholars; or the nostalgic reflections of the retiree. 'Back-stage' reflections are fleeting, private, whispered moments, which gives them the air of the illicit, the hurried, and the unwelcome.

Anthropologists hone countless practices of reflexivity and analysis that we apply to our countless field sites. Still, since we evince demonstrable ambivalence towards utilizing these technologies to look inward at our universities, our departments, ourselves, we generally fall far short of *meditative thinking*. Institutions are social constructions, of course, but if their denizens saw them as truly fluid and impermanent, then perhaps

certain crucial social illusions would be called into question. Is this not part of what we endeavor to do as anthropologists? Destabilizing the fictions and solidity of notions of national boundaries, racial and ethnic identity, etc., should hopefully lead our readers to think twice about the historical and sociocultural constructions of life, the universe and everything.

Since reflection and analysis lead to destabilized assumptions about how things came to be and the taken for grantedness of how things are, then perhaps anthropologists and Tibetan monastics have the greatest understanding of exactly how many fantasies of the 'real' we would stand to lose if we employed some of our meditative technologies upon ourselves. Why have we, as the constituent agents of these institutions, not challenged ourselves to look our fragility directly in the face? Perhaps we are afraid of what we might see, or even what may be conspicuously absent. Turning our own analytical technologies upon ourselves may ultimately lead to deeper understanding, or conversely it may lead to the loss of some very comfortable and cherished illusions, but either way, it seems that the cost-benefit analysis of such an endeavor is itself an exercise worth engaging in.

I hope to see actual meditative thinking upon ourselves recognized, taught, and supported within our periodicals, our ethnographies, our department meetings and also within the privacy of our own offices, homes and heads. I would encourage us to begin looking at the reflexive turn as more of a sustained and deep drilling towards what lies beneath, rather than as just a quick swivel of the head. The stakes are high, but still, how can we refuse a dose of our own medicine? Where are the self-reflexive experts of the reflexive? If not anthropologists, then who? If not, Buddhist monastics, then who?

As a lay practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, and as a graduate student deep in the throes of professional socialization, I am interested less in the hypocrisy (or avoidance) of experts who fail to actually take the medicines they faithfully prescribe to (or force upon) others, and rather, more centrally interested in how more penetrating engagements with our own scholastic *habitus*—our practices, theories, ideologies, norms, conventions, assumptions, values, judgments, economies, kinship networks, exchange systems, power relations, etc.—could potentially help us to better understand and improve our practices instead of just blithely enacting and reproducing them. As an added bonus, if our theories are as good as we think they are, then individuals who engage in deep, sustained reflections using the meditative technologies at hand might just find a bit more clarity and peace of mind along the way. This essay can be read as a critique of both of my communities, and yet as my training in Buddhism and anthropology has also given me the tools and techniques with which I engage them as subjects, this essay can be read as a rigorous practice within those two traditions. Since both Gelukpa monastics and American anthropologists already engage in practices of deep reflection and analysis, then why not go the distance and begin thinking meditatively about the institutions we are a part of, especially the very ones that have shaped our particular brands of mediation in the first place?

### **Meditations by Gelukpa Tibetan Monastics**

Despite being the envy of his fellows, one Tibetan Buddhist monk indicated to me that he harbored regret about his excellent posting in a foreign branch of his home monastery. It was a high status posting, but he had resigned himself to the fact that he

would probably never accomplish a Geshe degree. He noted that his busy schedule meant that he would not likely attain the meditative competence to achieve enlightenment in this lifetime. “I don’t meditate, but I wish I did,” he said sheepishly.

In his discussion of Buddhist monasticism, Gananath Obeyesekere writes that monastic sociality itself comprises one of the great paradoxes of Buddhism in practice, since the monastery that is ostensibly meant to separate the monk from society is both a society in and of itself, and still enmeshed and connected to lay society (albeit to greater or lesser extent in different historical and regional climes): “It therefore seems that the monk has escaped from one social structure only to get caught up in another...If renunciation aims to remove the fetters that bind one to worldly affairs, the monk has not succeeded” (2002:147). Obeyesekere goes on to say that if a monk truly wants to meditate, he must leave the monastery.<sup>iv</sup>

The total institution is absolute in its demands of its inmates (Goffman 1961), and yet it is striking that even as a total institution, the Tibetan monastery and nunnery are not absolutely single-minded. One might think that as a ‘total institution,’ the monastic institution, to a greater degree than the (arguably un-‘total’) university, should be a focused disciplining force towards meditative advancement, yet there are competing and sometimes contradictory demands made on monastics. Once, soon after converting to Buddhism, I rather naively believed that a Buddhist monastery or nunnery, institutions of ostensibly reflexive experts would be able to transcend the negative characteristics of so many other institutions—the inflated egos, over-attachment, bureaucracies, hierarchies, rigidity, and failure to see things as they truly are. However, during my dozen plus visits and stays in Tibetan monasteries and nunneries in both India and Tibet (for

days, weeks or months at a time between 2000 and 2007),<sup>v</sup> I encountered fragmentation, politics (intra and inter-social), nepotism, power plays, sexual harassment, strict patriarchal hierarchies, cliques, egos, desperate clinging to certain spurious notions of 'tradition,' resistance to change, etc. that I have observed in so many societies and institutions around the world, including so many American universities. Why the lack of mindfulness in a place that places such a high premium on mindfulness?

Tibetan Buddhism, by most accounts, emphasizes the value of mindfulness, contemplation, meditation, reflection and scholarly work towards seeing the ultimate, 'empty' nature of all conditioned phenomena. As a nascent lay Buddhist curious about the effects of a total submersion in Buddhist philosophy, I looked to the monastic institutions to see how the textual lessons on emptiness were negotiated in social practice. Just as I will later endeavor to understand for the world of American anthropologists: what does meditation look like in theory and practice? I will proceed by first examining the nature of meditation in Gelukpa Buddhism in theory, and whether it establishes itself as reflexive tool for examining itself or its environs. I will also explore the question of what is happening in practice—is meditation even a widespread practice in Gelukpa monasteries and nunneries, and if not, why not?

Tibetan Buddhist meditation techniques have been developed, taught and practiced in varying degrees for over a thousand years, and few Tibetan Buddhist scholars or scholars of Tibetan Buddhism would deny that within the literature it is a universally lauded and recommended practice (Dalai Lama 1995, Dreyfus 2003, Guenther 1992, Rao 1979, P. Rinpoche 1994, T. Rinpoche 2001). One meditates in order to gain a deeper



knowledge of the substantial illusions one invariably faces in society and in the mirror, because our illusions cause our suffering; meditation is then a technique for working towards enlightenment for the sake of oneself and all other sentient beings. Meditation is also known to bring mental clarity and peace of mind. In Tibetan, meditation (*sgom*) is literally ‘habitualizing,’ or ‘familiarizing’ oneself with the object of meditation through rigorous mental concentration.

Tibetan Buddhist meditations can be concentration enhancement exercises, or elaborate Tantric deity visualizations, but sometimes they are ‘analytical meditations,’ in which worldly norms are deconstructed through logic: ‘meditation on impartiality,’ ‘meditation on love,’ ‘meditation on sympathetic joy,’ or classic meditations on ‘emptiness,’ or ‘impermanence.’

However, meditation is not ubiquitous practice in Tibetan Gelukpa monastic contexts, and one finds that there is far more scholarly learning, debate, and reflection going on in monastic institutions than what is commonly thought of inside the tradition as actual meditation (*sgom*) practice. Gelukpa monks memorize and study reams of texts, and then, especially in the most prestigious teaching monasteries, they routinely debate each other either one on one or in larger groups. Most contemporary monastics rarely, if ever, meditate in the ways prescribed by the texts they study.

The three acumens (“*prajnas*”)—‘acumen arising from listening,’ ‘acumen arising from thinking,’ and ‘acumen arising from meditation,’ as described by Dreyfus in his seminal work, “The Sound of Two Hands Clapping” (1993)—show that meditation is just one level of reflection, which must be preceded by other important steps in learning and comprehension. The timing implicit in this triad is notable, since the third step of

actually practicing meditation is generally either deferred indefinitely, or at least until the monk has reached a very senior status. Many who attain the *Geshe* degree (loosely equivalent to a PhD in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy within the monastic institution) only begin meditation practice afterwards, in a year of study and retreat at a Tantric college. Often meditation is postponed until one can leave the monastery and go into retreat in meditation caves or huts elsewhere. There are some differences of opinion regarding the most important priorities and qualities of real monastic experts; meditation, it seems, is only one monastic technology, and it is a specialized technique that is generally only available at higher levels of study and deployed towards very narrow goals.

What are the institutional causes and effects of the deferral of meditation? Tibetan monks and nuns waiting to actually practice meditation until the 'right time' is perhaps not unlike undergraduate and graduate students waiting to use the theoretical techniques they've learned until they go to the field, or graduate students feeling that they should not publish anything until they've finished substantive doctoral research. There is a practical, strategic (Bourdieu 1977) sense that first one has to learn, and then what one has learned is best accomplished outside the institution that has taught one to how to do it. Gelukpa Tibetan scripture marks meditation, especially deity yoga meditations, as higher practice than other methods, and yet as such it is often considered out of reach of the typical Gelukpa monastic.

Meditation is often considered the purview of learned scholars, lamas and Geshe, and not a method suitable for lay people or the average monk. "Only lamas meditate," is often the prevailing notion in monastic institutions. Tibetan monasteries in

the intellectual Gelukpa tradition have institutionally downplayed the significance of meditation in practice (though not in theory), by making memorization and debate the primary method of learning.<sup>vi</sup> Monks at the primary seats of learning often enter the teaching monasteries at a young age and immediately begin systematic memorization of the most important treatises in the tradition (Sopa 1983), many of which actually foregrounding the significance of meditation as a method towards attaining enlightenment. Lectures, intense periods of independent reading, and frequent debates are the primary pedagogy through which Tibetan monastics, and for many student-monks practice. The other significant parts of monastic life include ritual, chanting, and prayers, as well as labor for the monastery. However, at the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics, the Namgyal monastery in Dharamsala, and the many other places I visited, there was never time on the schedule set aside for meditation practice.

The ‘listening’ and ‘thinking’ are done as preparatory work for years, while the ‘meditation’ is considered ‘the work of lamas.’ According to one informant, student monks at the “Institute for Buddhist Dialectics,” a Tibetan monastery in Dharamsala, considered meditation an advanced practice that was beyond them, so any attempt to meditate in public or set up a meditation session, was met with antagonism by other students who found the effort to be posturing, showing-off or such a premature performance that it would inevitably be a waste of time.

When meditation does take place it is often accomplished elsewhere, at specific points in one’s educational path, and often away from the main monastery (in certain Tantric colleges, in retreat huts, or in caves). Although Obeyesekere was more familiar with Theravadan Buddhism(s) his comments on the impossibility of meditation in monasteries ring true to the

Tibetan Gelukpa experience as well; he goes on to write, “What then happens to the monk who wants to engage in the meditative effort that will hasten his salvation? The logical answer is simple enough: he must escape from his home in the monastery in a further flight into homelessness” (2002:148). There is a history of rare ascetic monks practicing in caves in Tibet, but more common was the intermediary step of meditative work in a Tantric college.

When Geshe Sopha, a highly respected senior Tibetan lama in exile in the United States, recounted his education (in pre-occupation Tibet) in detailed interviews with students (1983), he did not mention any structured meditation practice until he entered the Tantra college (which he entered only after his Geshe degree had been conferred). He clarified that not all of the meditation students were Geshe, but that after attaining the Geshe degree, seeking further study in Tantric meditation is one of a handful of common options. When senior students or Geshe in the Gelukpa tradition do meditate, then often they are directed to focus on Tantric visualizations (or deity yoga). In Geshe Sopha’s case the emphasis at the Lower Tantra College was on meditations related to the Mandala rites of Guhyasamaja, Sambhara, and Yamantaka (1983:53).

Not all Tibetan monastics get the opportunity to live and meditate in a Tantric college, as they become more senior, or even as they work their way up certain hierarchies. There is significant divergence in the monastery about administration vs. scholarly pursuit vs. meditative discipline vs. ritual specialization, e.g. the Abbott vs. the Geshe vs. the forest dwelling ascetic vs. the discipline master. The ‘ideal’ Gelukpa monk would perform all tasks with equal competence, and some categories certainly overlap in practice, but often monks must specialize and choose

certain paths that foreclose others. There are competing hierarchies at work, and competing claims on the time of the monks and nuns.

Dreyfus wrote that Tibetan monastics in exile are cognizant of the multiplicity of qualities of the monks and nuns within any given the institution: “ ‘The great monastic seats are like the ocean.’ They contain all kinds of fish: scholars, students, meditators, monks involved in trade and politics, monks spending their lives comfortably without having to work, and even punk-monks (*ldab ldob*) — gangs who fight each other and play competitive sports” (2003:38). Dreyfus observed that from his experience and in the interviews that he conducted, it appeared that “not many” monks meditate in the Tibetan scholastic monasteries of contemporary Tibet and India (168).

Although the majority of significant Buddhist treatises in the Gelukpa Tibetan tradition emphasize the importance of meditation, the dearth of meditators in practice indicates that meditation is a method that can often be deferred for the time being, as other religious qualities are being developed. Since in Tibetan paramitayana cosmology enlightenment will almost certainly come after eons more lifetimes have come and gone (Collins 1998, Nattier 1991), there is no popular rush to meditate earnestly in the present, either for lay people or monastics.<sup>vii</sup>

It occurs to me that I have never actually seen a Tibetan monk or nun doing meditation at their home institution in real life.<sup>viii</sup> At a Gelukpa monastery in Dharamsala, India that is dedicated to a state oracle, I witnessed courses taught, long hours in the debate courtyard, and long rituals, offerings and chanting, but denizens never admitted to having practiced meditation. From the guest house at a Gelukpa nunnery in Dharamsala, one can watch young nuns engage in vigorous debate out by the gates,

one can listen to hours and hours of chanting, and catch a glimpse of the classes offered, but if you ask the nuns about meditation you are met with tittering, shrugs, or blank faces. I asked one nun whom I had befriended while living at the monastery in 2000 if she or her fellow nuns ever meditated, and she laughed. My stay at the nunnery confirmed that if indeed there is meditation taking place, it is happening in private and in secret, since it is considered the purview of lamas, not regular nuns. My informants from the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics noted that while most monks did not meditate in public or in private, it was assumed that in the privacy of their own quarters senior faculty probably did analytical meditations on the impermanence of the self, as well as certain deity visualizations, but no one knew for sure.

One very occasionally sees Tibetan monastics meditating in the three-point posture at pilgrimage places, such as Bodh Gaya or Sarnath, but these cases are not nearly as common as seeing Tibetan monastics doing full prostrations in accordance with certain 'preliminary practices' or *ngondro* practices (to make merit and cleanse negative karmas). Monks and nuns (and lay people) doing circumambulations around holy sites, making offerings, or reciting mantras are a common sight at Buddhist pilgrimage places, but Tibetan monastics in meditation posture practicing what they've learned from their texts remains a rarity. However, not everyone approves of the notion that meditation is currently a high-level specialization or professional practice for only the most accomplished practitioners. In 2006, the Dalai Lama (whose daily routine is reputed to include meditation sessions), gave a talk in Bodh Gaya sitting under the Bodhi tree, in which he addressed the Tibetan sangha in the Tibetan language saying essentially that monastics and lay people do far too little

meditation practice for their own good, and that instead of doing divinations or prayers for their lay followers, high lamas should prescribe meditation practices for them to do themselves.

But still: even though meditation practice is not widespread, isn't the scholastic work implicit in the other *prajnas* of the monastery encouraging critical, reflexive thinking? By and large, Tibetan Gelukpa monastics, through recourse to the 'acumen rising from listening' and the 'acumen arising from thinking,' are learning and discussing philosophies that reflect upon interdependence, emptiness, non-attachment, and other notions that destabilize easy social fantasies. Tibetans monastics may not be meditating en masse, but many are institutionally encouraged to reflect deeply on the world around them with Buddhist analytical techniques. For my Tibetan Gelukpa informants this was accomplished through the vantage point of social criticism embedded in the texts they studied and the *vinaya* (monastic codes) they keep, and also through their own version of Bourdieu's "scholastic point of view" (1990) that allows them that certain distance from society which is institutionally supposed to encourage reflection and critique on the social norms of those outside the institution (e.g. the sins of desire, attachment, greed, etc. that are thought to be more common amongst householders).

However, in Gelukpa monastic contexts, reflexivity is only encouraged up to a point. "In the debate courtyard, some monks do talk about how the Buddha is empty of inherent existence," said one informant from a monastery in India, but he went on to say that monks never debated whether the monastery itself is empty of inherent existence. The monastic institution seems to teach a version of reflexivity that fails to emphasize reflection on the monastic institution itself; no Tibetan Buddhist monastic has

been able to point me towards a textual source that expounds upon the necessity of recognizing the “emptiness” of the monastic institution, monastic discipline, or monastic hierarchies,<sup>ix</sup> and no one has admitted to engaging in any practices of the sort.

Guru devotion and attachment to one’s monastery, however, are cultivated in both theory and practice. While emptiness is the true nature of all things in Geluk Buddhism, it is significant that the emptiness of the monastic institution then remains unspoken and implicit, compared with explicit efforts to undermine the solidity of self, material objects, romantic love, etc.

Tibetan monastics are never explicitly encouraged to use their *prajnas* to destabilize the institution beneath their feet. Neither in text nor in practice are hierarchy, disciplining, and the micro-cultures of the monasteries and nunneries considered appropriate objects for meditation or analysis. Occasionally, in the hallways of the monastic institution, there are whispered questions about the problem of attachment to the monastery; one informant from a Tibetan in exile monastery told me that he and his friends wondered aloud: “Is attachment to one’s monastery healthy, since it will bring one into contact with wisdom that will teach one how to develop true non-attachment, or is attachment to one’s monastery still just attachment to be overcome?” These conversations are significant, but they remain in the margins, in the private spaces and moments of monastic life, as if illicit and improper.

I have argued that insofar as many, if not most, Gelukpa monastics fail to ‘meditate’ in the strictest sense of their own terms, and even insofar as they still think critically about the world around them, they stop short of truly reflective, penetrating meditative thinking upon their own institutions. But what would



monastics gain from using their technologies, their *prajnas*, as techniques towards self-reflection on their institutions? If we are to take seriously the notion that “all conditioned phenomena are impermanent,” then perhaps monastics would do well to analyze and deconstruct their institutions (as they are wont to do to lay institutions) with their analytical and meditation techniques. Or conversely, perhaps Gelukpa Buddhists would decide upon reflection that an un-reflected upon monastic institution is crucial to the functioning of regular sangha, as any other minor illusion or untruth propagated in the name of ‘skilful means’ to lead the unenlightened closer to the truest truths, but it seems that these questions could be productively examined publicly, institutionally, and intentionally in order to judge how things stand and how they should stand.

As a convert to Tibetan Buddhism, I straddle the fuzzy line between insider and outsider, so this section has itself been a personal reflection on institutions that I have practiced in and have (with varying degrees of success) endeavored to put my faith in. So as a Buddhist practitioner now, and not an anthropologist entirely shackled to cultural relativism, it seems to me that even in their own terms there is a great deal of room left for self-reflection upon the monastic tradition and on other Buddhist social mores; here I suggest only that the key may lay inside the tradition itself, because Gelukpa Tibetan Buddhism has its own razor sharp analytical techniques that might be turned upon itself in a sustained manner to useful effect. If this observation grates on the anthropologist trained to pounce on anything that feels the tiniest bit judgmental or prescriptive, well then go ahead and write cranky comments in the margins, but by all means please read on, because I am just getting warmed up.

### **Meditation and Reflexivity Amongst American Anthropologists**

What are the consequences of failing to think meditatively about ourselves? Put another way—why bother? I began the section on Tibetan monastics with a confession that my first brushes with the egos, hierarchies, misrecognitions and attachments therein left me deeply shaken in the strength of the Buddhist philosophies that these interlocutors also professed faith in: that is, if an institution devoted to and steeped in the reflexive technologies of Buddhist thought can be so dysfunctional in practice, then must my initial estimation of those vaunted technologies be necessarily re-evaluated, de-valued, or demoted? Will anyone reading this be surprised that I had a similar experience of partial-disillusionment when I began applying to graduate schools, and was quickly bruised by my first contacts with the egos, hierarchies, misrecognitions and attachments within some highly esteemed academic departments? Why *are* so many departments tangled up in such impenetrable webs of intrigue and dysfunction?

We speak in whispers, huddled and bent over cold beers: about how certain faculty try to reproduce themselves at the expense of our own visions and desires; about myopic committee members who panic if it looks like their student may go down a theoretical road other than their own; about sexual harassment behind closed doors; about being worked too hard for too little; about how the boundaries of gender, race and othering seem to show up the darndest places; about not being listened to; about confusion, about vocabulary, about bullshit; about the games, the rituals and the performances; about power and the lack thereof. Like flies buzzing around a barn teaming with overlapping,

competing, barely visible spider webs (yes, you remember, those webs of intrigue and dysfunction), we often don't learn the rules until it is too late, many of us have been caught or lost along the way, and some of us can no longer even remember what it was that brought us inside to begin with. It could be much worse; it could be much better. The academy, like the Tibetan monastery, is no contemplative paradise.

Do scholars meditate on scholasticism? Scholars have gotten into the practice of writing down their analytical meditations, even sometimes titling their work as such. Among many others, consider Descartes' famous "Meditations" (1948), Kierkegaard's "Meditations" (1955), or more recently Bourdieu's "Pascalian Meditations" (2000).<sup>x</sup> While academics do not physically "meditate" as part of their epistemological process, arguably these scholars, like Gelukpa Tibetan Buddhists, do engage in analytical reflection upon their subjects. Many of our academic theories are analytics designed to help us dig deeper, and see more with more clarity.

If scholars possess reflective analytical techniques, then, just as in the monastery, it is important to pay attention to who is actually using which techniques, who is teaching them, and who is learning them. Also, are any of these tools being used to the fullest extent possible — are we thinking meditatively? How critically do we examine our own academic culture(s) using any of our own theories? If we don't, should we? If all that is solid melts into air, then how fragile are the walls of our own ivory tower(s)? Also, what is the place of reflection in the university, and what is the place of the university in our reflections?

Both academics and monastics have a whole host of analytical technologies to choose from, but we must all choose. Even a choice to not engage is a choice fraught with consequences. We

choose; we reflect on our choices within our work, but we do not reflect on our work through those very choices. As the Gelukpas Tibetan monastics at Namgyal monastery have countless reflective tools, such as stabilization meditations, analytical meditations of impermanence, and Tantric visualizations on anyone from Kalachakra to Chenrezig to draw upon if they so choose, we anthropologists can draw on our own toolkit(s) of analytical technologies as we see fit: practice theory, Marxism, deconstruction, structuralism, psychoanalysis, etc. Intellectual practice in the American academy requires quiet, contemplative reflection, and some tough choices, but not the full lotus position.

In my eight plus years in two different graduate programs, I have suffered some hard knocks at my own institutions, from granting agencies, from professional groups, etc., but I know from friends at other universities that the situation elsewhere can be, and often is, far worse. I have actually been reasonably content as a graduate student, fairly satisfied with my choice of profession, but like many of my peers, I am under no illusion that the culture of the academy is always, or even often, enlightened or enlightening.

My observations of academic departments in my graduate institutions (and others) have left me questioning the efficacy of our theories, and our very *raison d'être*; if the process of demystifying, recognizing, and observing certain truer truths about the cultural practices of our informants still leaves so many anthropologists dysfunctional and alienated from ourselves and our colleagues, then does it not perhaps diminish the reputed value of anthropology's reflexive technologies? What would deeper, sustained reflection upon ourselves using our own tools accomplish? If our theoretical tools, our mirrors and

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microscopes, are useful and valuable as epistemological devices, then I suspect our academic culture(s) (and our egos) would undergo some transformations once we subjected ourselves to closer inspection.

Surface observations upon academic culture are a start, but we can do better, I think. Internal audits, master plans, and focus groups are all tightly controlled modes of self-inspection usually conducted by the university administration. While there is a literature on the various mechanisms of academic sociality that gesture feebly towards self-knowledge (E. Boyer et al. 1994, Clark 1987, Finkelstein 1984, Lazarsfeld and Thielsens 1958, Lewis 1975, Wilson 1979), few of these treatises extend beyond a statistical accounting of the minutiae of academic structures. There is better evidence of meditative thinking in contemporary anthropology; more penetrating academic meditations (Adams 1976, Becher 1989, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 and 1979, Bourdieu 2000, Boyer 2003 and 2005, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Siegel 1981, Strathern 2000, Taussig 2006) are far more elusive, yet far more useful as potential tools of disciplinary regeneration. However, even these penetrating moments are generally relegated to the margins, and considered side-tracks to the real business of being an anthropologist; they thus represent slight dips of the toe inside waters I would have us fully submerged in. Far from having us abandon our work with collaborators elsewhere, I would only suggest that we can continue apace elsewhere, and also begin to institutionally, integrally, intentionally work with and upon ourselves.

Using Falzon's interpretation of Foucault as the consummate self-reflexive, whose ability to always step outside the system to rigorously and fearlessly look back in, Hall argues that Foucault can and should serve as a model to academics to reflect deeply on

themselves (2002). Citing Foucault, Giddens (1990), and others who have pointed towards the meta-reflexive, Hall rightly points out that with theoretical tools already firmly in hand, social scientists are uniquely situated to examine our own social norms. I agree with these perspectives, insofar as they demonstrate that scholars have the tools for meditative thinking at our fingertips. However, I do not think that Foucault's tools are the only ones suited for the meta-reflexive. We ought to push ourselves to employ our many theoretical tools more whole-heartedly, and more systematically. I would like to argue that it is not our analytical tools that are necessarily flawed, but rather, it is our reticence in applying them to ourselves at the university, department and individual levels that has led us to remain poor practitioners of our own ideals.

Faure describes in great detail the ways in which philosophers and scholars of the Western academy almost obsessively and repetitively fall into the same philosophical traps of Western thinking (especially notions of Aristotelian logic like the rule of the excluded middle): "The idea that restricting philosophy to grammar, repeating the same structures over and over again in a quasi-obsessive manner, calls to mind the obsession with detail analyzed by Freud in connection with his remarks on ritual" (Faure 2004:47).

To what extent are the minutiae of scholarly pursuits just another set of rituals, another practice of a certain kind of magic? If indeed this is the case, then one would do best to dispose of the conceit that ours are unconditioned truths and that our incantations are somehow anything other than cultural constructions in and of themselves. While Faure does not advocate that scholars turn their backs on their academic lineages and rituals, he would have us recognize that ours are no more or

less valid than those of Buddhism (or other traditions). His own embrace of Buddhist philosophy is therefore not meant to undercut the Western history of philosophy, but rather to complicate it, and to expose some barred doors and hidden passageways in our notions of logic and rationality that we have forgotten, ignored or repressed.

“But wait,” my interlocutors in anthropology have said in various ways and at various times, “we are experts in reflexivity.” In various ways and at various times, I have responded: “Are we? Are we, really?”

We are experts of reflecting on the social, but it is still only ‘their’ sociality that interests us, not ‘ours.’ That is to say, ‘they’ are no longer only indigenous peoples, the deeper we find them in the jungle the better; today, ‘they’ are also immigrants, investment bankers, chocolate makers, and UN staffers. Yet our subjects remain ‘they,’ and if they are ever ‘we,’ then that means that we too are sometimes immigrants and chocolatiers. Rarely, if ever are ‘we’ the subjects, meaning we the anthropologists, we the scholars.

It is possible to reflect upon ourselves even as we ponder them, as Michael Taussig has demonstrated through his use of his concept of the “nervous system,” which meditatively elucidates the place of the writer and his discipline within the narrative and through the narrative (2006). Dominic Boyer has also recently demonstrated in his book *Spirit and System* (2005) that our knowledge making practices can be examined alongside theirs. As Boyer contrasts the theories of systems theorists with the epistemologies evinced within a drinking group (*stammtisch*) of journalists in East Berlin, Boyer notes that the system theorists necessarily posit themselves as outside the system looking in from without. These theorists position themselves thusly in order

to theorize themselves as the retainers of '*geist*' or 'spirit' in the face of the 'system.' One is compelled to reflect upon the consequences of reflexivity without self-reflection as Boyer writes that "the phenomenology of expertise casts the context of intellectual reflection into a state of triviality even when, as in the case of social theory, social context becomes an explicit and expert matter of attention. This explains how a social theorist can produce fully brilliant knowledge of social conditions and relations at the same time that s/he is always prone to ignore his or her own immediate conditions and relations of knowledge-making" (Boyer 2005:299). While I heartily agree with Boyer's insights and methods, I find myself more optimistic about our opportunities for transcending this state of things. At the very least we could at least try to more mindfully acknowledge and transform the conditions of our knowledge-making and reflexivity.

Over the past twenty or thirty years (depending on who you ask), in anthropology especially, scholars have evinced new dedication to the notion of reflexivity. Since our own cultural mores play a role in both the research process and the eventual framing of the ethnographic text, scholars now challenge each other to be cognizant and honest regarding the impossibility of the precise objectivity aspired to once upon a time. The reflexive turn that was ushered in by Jay Ruby (1982), Clifford and Marcus (1986), and others, was indubitably a turn in the right direction, but it is just that, a turn towards a path that we have yet to walk down. Reflexivity only asks us to be cognizant of 'our' (scholars') fraught relationship with 'them' (our subjects). The reflexive turn is a methodological technology that encourages us to look deeply at the complexity of our discipline's methods and products, but it stops there. We have stopped cold—dead in our tracks—as afraid



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to face ourselves in the mirror as the garden variety eisotrophobic. Perhaps Kluckhohn's desire that anthropology's insights about others could teach us something important about ourselves (1949) should be revisited, reappraised, restructured and revived in a new form, so that anthropology could provide clearer mirror(s) for (hu)man(ity). I would like to walk further down the path; why not be reflexive about our own scholastic communities, our discipline's micro-cultures, our department politics, and perhaps even ourselves and our own desires in relation to the academy (stability? success? fame?). Why not be reflexive all the way down?

Undergraduate and graduate students toil away at the business of learning anthropology's theoretical history, and write essays for class in preparation for more sustained applications of our theories later. We spar in conferences and seminars, and some of us even tentatively publish a review or article here and there, but few students would have the audacity to try to publish a book (just as few monks at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics would have the gumption to practice the meditations they have been memorizing and debating). Graduate students returning from the field have passed through a crucial rite of passage, and our options expand before us. The post-field graduate student is permitted to write at length about 'them,' whether the 'them' is a tribe of Hopis or a corporate staff in Tokyo, but *only* 'them.' Conventions in our discipline rarely, if ever, encourage anthropologists to write about 'us.' Faculty might dismiss such analyses as navel-gazing, grade such efforts with skepticism and disdain; colleagues might warn that we may be pushing ourselves so far off the page as to think ourselves out of future grants or jobs (gulp!). My subject position as an ABD graduate student makes this an interesting moment for observation. I have both

everything (my future?) and nothing (my future?!) to lose in engaging in this line of thinking.

Recently, Steven Sangren noted in his article, “Anthropology of Anthropology? Further reflections on reflexivity” (2007), that it is precisely the etiquette and conventions of our discipline that make an anthropology of anthropology intractable practice, and insists upon caution over further public exploration (‘back-stage’ reflexivity being a supportable alternative), even as he himself is in the midst of a ‘front-stage’ reflection on the discipline. While I agree that our current disciplinary conventions resist reflection upon themselves, I would argue that it is in bad faith to explode ‘their’ social illusions and continue on as if ‘our’ illusions are made of stronger stuff. If it is in bad form to write an ethnography of ‘us,’ it is also true that it is considered good form to push conventions towards truer truths, therefore on this point our own cultural logics stand in tension. Furthermore, conventions and etiquettes are always already fluid, so while one ought to be sensitive of where we stand at present, that knowledge should never foreclose movement towards another horizon.

It is possible that upon further reflection upon further reflection some scholars would feel that the anthropology of anthropology is as untenable and problematic as Sangren would have us believe. If the Buddha and Freud (and oh so many others) were right, then as humans we are all quite attached to our attachments and illusions, and putting them under scrutiny might be exceedingly painful. At the very least, I believe the question is worth further exploration. Whatever others may decide for themselves, I fully intend to keep playing with the idea. The conversation itself is evidence of meditative thinking. Sangren may find that he has been guilty of it himself.

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But what could we learn by writing ethnographies of anthropological knowledge production practices? What about using our theories of the subject to confront some of our own desires to publish, to teach, to reproduce ourselves and our ideas? Why not deploy our own theories on society on our own departments, conferences, and academic micro-cultures? Why not use our kinship theories to penetrate our own intellectual lineages? Where is the ethnography of the AAAs? What about using our theories of the subject to destabilize some of the bloated egos that sometimes haunt our disciplines? Would this be obscenely extreme omphaloskepsis? On the contrary, I believe that it could mean meditating our way deeper towards something healthier, more honest, and more complete. Can a discipline self-actualize? I find myself wondering—what might *meditative ethnography* actually look like...?

I can envision a book, in which the analysis of ‘their’ (Sinhalese Buddhist? Thai boxers? American ‘news’ pundits?) ideologies, bodies, assumptions, and illusions are deconstructed side by side with ‘ours’ (anthropology’s? the author’s university? department? family? etc?). I currently fantasize about writing a dissertation in which each chapter is followed by a reflexive interval, in which I use the frames of my informants (from “the field” in India) and my preferred meditative technologies (from the field of anthropology) as mirrors to turn onto my academic micro-cultures and then upon myself. I imagine an institution not paralyzed with the fear of self-analysis, and departments plagued by less neurosis, less drama, less suffering.

I desire an experiment in the classroom of Myth and Ritual that would have students read our wide canon on theories of ritual, and then be invited to discuss the rituals of the university, and within the class itself, and to have them experience the power

of some of our theories as tools for meditation on the moment: an institutional invitation to 'know thyself' that really means it. And no, I am sorry, but including "the Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" (Miner 1975) on your Intro syllabus does not constitute final absolution.

I imagine a field of anthropology in which more, not less, is on the table for critique, analysis and reflection. I hope for a moment when the act of turning the tables helps us to recognize both the strengths and limitations of our theories past and present, so that with less attachment we continue to work towards the even better. I know that these moments happen, but I would urge us to push them forward out of the margins. I believe that thinking meditatively about our institutions in print, in class, in meetings, and in private would allow us greater confidence in our work, our discipline, in ourselves and in one another.

### **"Deep Play" in Three Acts**

Why do we pack away our concentration and mindfulness along our notebooks, pens and tape-recorders when we return home from the field? I have gestured towards some potential benefits in engaging more frequently and more deeply with the analytical tools of one's trade, but to be honest, I think that the technologies of one culture could possibly be productive for other cultures, and we could experiment and play with the idea that we all still have something to learn from one another.

In the quest for the truest truths possible, Tibetan Gelukpa monastics would arguably stand to gain from some of the methods and insights of ethnographic inquiry (I have a feeling Derrida would have been very popular at the Institute of

Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala), and we anthropologists may be able to learn something from our Tibetan comrades in reflective thinking. My prescription for a more hopeful anthropological future does not hinge on this sort of appropriation, but it never hurts to explore our alternatives to Weber, Levi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Foucault and the next big thing.

Just for fun, for kicks, perhaps we could try meditating on ourselves ‘Tibetan style,’ using a little of our substance and some version of their form, that is, a few of popular styles of meditation found in their textual traditions: stabilization, analytical and visualization. Playing with theories and technologies, ours, theirs, or both in tandem, may be another kind of ‘deep play’ (Geertz 1973) that is still quite a bit more serious than the ‘gratuitous games’ Bourdieu charges scholars with playing (1990: 381); here the stakes themselves are far less significant than the meaning created by risking them.

## **Act 1**

A Tibetan text on meditation might advocate ‘watching the breath’ in order to both develop concentration, and to expose the wily underbelly of the mind, an organ that we mistakenly believe we have under control.

Now, try watching the university’s breath. You are at the university; in the office, or in the library, or in the hallway of your department. Take a moment; stop; sit; concentrate. Close your eyes, and breathe deeply—just for a few seconds. Once your mind is calm, you can begin. Stabilization meditations in Buddhism are meant to steady the mind with hard and fast concentration on the breath, on the moment, the ever fleeting ‘now.’

Open your eyes and observe single-pointedly. Watch the university swirl around you, and watch your mind swirl around the university. Do not judge, just observe quietly. Take it all in, but do not get swept away. If your mind wanders, don't be alarmed, but gently bring it back to focused concentration on the university's breath.

*Did you notice anything new about the university? Your mind? What if we did this often, daily - how might it change our relationship to our academic habitus?*

## **Act 2**

The second type of Tibetan Buddhist meditation requires analytical concentration, so we anthropologists should be naturals at this. We do this all day every day, of course, but generally, as I have already argued, we analyze them, not us.

Choose a theory, any theory. Your favorite, perhaps. Hmm... just for the sake of illustration, I will demonstrate what I mean. "All that is solid melts into air." Consider this statement for a moment. What did Marx mean? Think through the analytic at length, and perhaps what role it played in Marx's theoretical contributions writ large.

Now think about the university—the students, the faculty, the staff, the grounds. Fix that theory upon us, analyze what we are doing, what we do, and what we say we do. Meditate on this for a while—fixate, concentrate, analyze. Can you do it for twenty minutes, ten minutes? Try it. Come on, even five minutes. I dare you.

*Does the theory you meditated on speak to your experience of the university in any way? If not, isn't that just as significant as if it did? What*

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*if we were committed to doing this sort of analysis on ourselves with any and all of our chosen theories?*

### **Act 3**

Gelukpas swear by guru or deity visualizations, so why not give it a whirl?

Close your eyes, and visualize your favorite theorist, \_\_\_\_\_, (or the chair of your committee) sitting in front of you. Try to focus on the qualities of this person that you respect, and establish a motivation to develop these qualities in yourself. S/he responds by sending out these qualities in a stream of light from his/her forehead to yours. S/he turns into light and moves towards you, until your 'guru' is hovering above you, and facing the same way that you are. At this point, s/he dissolves in light at your crown; the light flows into you, and your own body glows with that light. Now you are \_\_\_\_\_. You have all of that person's qualities, strengths and ideas, and you can channel their theoretical gifts in your own writing.

*Visualizing yourself as an academostar may not rocket you towards the academo-stratosphere, but who knows, it may not be all that different from the standard motivational invocations to 'see the ball go in the goal' before taking the shot. I am curious whether meditative visualizations of our favorite theorists would further encourage a culture of guru devotion that already seems too prevalent in our institutions of higher learning. I'm returning back up to Act 2 to meditate on Weber's notion of 'charisma' as it might elucidate power dynamics in the university, but you can continue down to Act Up.*

## **Act Up**

Please do not misunderstand me — I am not suggesting that Tibetan Buddhist meditation techniques, Marx, or your (once and future) dissertation chair actually hold some sort of elusive key to life, the universe and everything. This interlude was not meant to be prescriptive, except in the sense that I would like us to shake things up a bit. Act up, play.

This interlude was meant to show that meditative thinking can be fluid, fun even, and that there are dusty corners that we have left unexamined. Mirrors only serve as mirrors if we look into them. Looking into a mirror can be a deeply troubling, but powerfully formulative experience, and it can also give us a new, fresh perspective on what we never knew we never knew.

This essay has in and of itself served as a meditation for me about the horizons and limits of the theories and practices of my two chosen traditions: the institutions of the Gelukpa Buddhism and American anthropology. I had to look deeply into these very mirrors myself while trying to examine the potential benefits of doing so, and while I did reflect upon some of my spiritual and academic norms and assumptions, I have perhaps only managed the tip of an iceberg. So, perhaps you are wondering about the effects I have experienced through this meditation that we are just now concluding together. Do I see myself, my religious beliefs, and/or my anthropological practices in sharper relief for having composed this essay in the first place? Do I actually feel so much better off for having taken meditative thinking seriously? What was lost along the way? Risked? Learned? Gained? These, I think, are very, very useful questions, and quite a fine way to begin.



## **Endnotes**

i. While conventional wisdom would have it that Tibet had only monasteries, and no universities pre-Chinese invasion in the 20th century, there was in fact a school (*rtse slobgrwa*) in the Dalai Lama's residence, the Potala Palace, which trained the aristocracy towards professions in government.

ii. In this paper, I will primarily refer to American anthropologists, but with the understanding that many of the patterns observed here are more widely (though not universally) relevant in university contexts. My point is not that there is no difference between departments, and disciplines within the US, but I maintain that there is enough similarity to make some general statements about academic patterns of social behavior.

iii. Tibetan Buddhist clergy are in fact quite different across time, region, school, gender, etc., yet there are similarities enough to make some fair generalizations about the experience of Tibetan Buddhist monastics (monks and nuns) in contemporary Gelukpa institutions. Tibetan in exile monasteries are modeled on extant Tibetan monasteries which continue to function, albeit under different socio-historical contexts. I will focus here on monastic Gelukpas in exile in India.

iv. The paradox of Buddhist sociality within Buddhist monastic institutions are not entirely un-reflected upon in Buddhism writ large, as there are some who withdraw from the institutional duties of the monastery for meditation and deep study, like the Thai, Burmese or Ceylonese forest-dwellers (Mendelson 1975, Tambiah 1984) or the rare ascetic Tibetan monk (Lopez 2004:262). Obeyesekere notes that the forest dwellers are caught in a Catch-22 of sorts, since the more withdrawn and pious a forest dwelling community, the more lay people will gravitate to it, often forcing institutionalization: "there is no way that they can escape the relentless piety of devotees who seek them out in their forest fastnesses, invade their solitude and thus help to destroy the very saintliness that they so much admire" (2002:148).

v. My work with Tibetan Gelukpa monks and nuns on meditation was not a primary, funded field project, but was rather a secondary question that I pursued while doing three other research projects with these communities (and others) on engaged Buddhism, holy objects, and transnational Tibetan Buddhism. Despite the fact that my research on this particular topic was secondary, I pursued it through formal and informal interviews, and took fieldnotes throughout. My interest was personal as well as academic; I desired to understand to what extent meditation and reflection were being practiced by sangha in various monasteries and nunneries, so that I might better contextualize my own Buddhist values and practices.

vi. Other sects, such as Nyingmas and Kagyus, may have more institutionalized opportunities for meditation. Kagyu monasteries often offer three year meditation retreats, sometimes inside the monastic compounds. Outside of the Geluk context, Tibetan monasteries emphasize two types of engagement: shedra (the exposition and study of texts), and drupdra (the practice of meditation retreat).

vii. Certain Tantrayana philosophy does suggest that with diligence in Tantric practice one could achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime, but in practice Tibetan Gelukpa monastics see this as a path for the very exceptional few, like Milarepa.

viii. This is, of course, excluding Tibetans who are running or teaching at transnational Tibetan Buddhist centers, such as the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. Western practitioners and their Tibetan gurus tend to foreground meditation much more than their counterparts in ethnically-Tibetan Buddhist institutions.

ix. It is taken for granted that all conditioned phenomena are empty of inherent existence, but while one is encouraged to meditate on the emptiness of many things, people, places (and even the self), the fact that one is not encouraged to meditate on the institutions and trappings of Buddhism is a conspicuous omission. Exceptions exist, but most are not well-known, mainstream or in wide circulation in Geluk

monasteries. For example, Saraha, an Indian scholar overlooked by the Gelukpas, but popular in the Kagyu tradition, discusses how institutions, rituals, and so forth are empty of inherent existence. Arguably, although these moments of deep meditative thinking exist in a handful of texts, they are generally overlooked in monastic practice. It would be worth a longer exegesis on some of these textual exceptions, such as the social critique of monastics that could be imputed from the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (Thurman 2000) and other works, but that task is beyond the purview of this essay.

x. These ‘Western’ meditations reputed to probe deeply—more deeply than the common academic treatise—but do they really? While this remains an interesting category of work that deserves far more attention than I give it here, I am not inclined to privilege these self-styled ‘meditations’ above the many other works that are products of deep reflection and contemplative analysis.

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